

Loop 202 on several agenda next week: Critics see delays as helping their cause

By Doug Murphy

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A flurry of discussion on the proposed South Mountain Loop 202 will take place next week, but don't think that means a decision on where the freeway will be built will be made anytime soon.

The latest estimate by the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) is that the environmental impact statement will be wrapped up in early 2008, almost four years after the original 2004 decision deadline.

The Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee meets Monday night and high on the agenda is the Loop 202 and a series of letters it plans to send to elected officials, asking questions gathered from the community on what impact the construction and operation of the freeway will have on Ahwatukee Foothills roads, services and residents.

On Thursday the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team (CAT) also meets, attempting to rebuild trust between the Arizona Department of Transportation and the team which is supposed to advise the state on the freeway's route and design.

Trust broke down last year, after the CAT was pushed by ADOT to make a recommendation on the western leg of the project and recommending the Loop 202 connect with Interstate 10 at the Loop 101 interchange. ADOT then waited two months until director Victor Mendez announced the 55th Avenue alignment, despite concerns about fuel storage facilities next to the proposed freeway, ground water contamination the state might be forced to cleanup and a traffic study that showed dumping traffic onto I-10 would create congestion.

Next week's meetings follow one earlier this week, where frustration at the slow pace of the freeway's study boiled over during a Maricopa Association of Governments meeting. That MAG meeting resulted in a recommendation to get Gov. Janet Napolitano involved in speeding things along, but the motion was tabled until next month.

All in all, the Loop 202 has done little but frustrate supporters and opponents alike.

"My personal feeling is the delay bodes well for no build on Pecos Road," said Jim Jochim, a freeway opponent and founding member of Protect Arizona Resources and Children.

The nonprofit group has retained environmental attorney Howard Shanker in preparations for challenging the freeway along Pecos Road and the health hazards that it could pose to students at nearby schools.

Meanwhile Laurel Arndt, a member of the village planning committee and the CAT, thinks that good results can come out of the long planning process, with the CAT forcing ADOT to look at elements of the plan that it might normally pass over.

But she also admits that questions raised by the CAT over air quality or routing the freeway won't change ADOT's desire to build the freeway, but may influence others, including Gov. Janet Napolitano and the Gila River Indian Community to look at alternatives that better meet the future transportation needs of the area.

"There is no one crying out for this freeway except ADOT," Arndt said.